



### Routine Pleasures

An interview between Roos Gortzak and Melissa Gordon

**Roos Gortzak** Your show at Vleeshal is titled **Routine Pleasures** after a film of the same name by Jean-Pierre Gorin. At the beginning of the film, two men are sitting on a bench (which turns out to be a miniature set inside of a whole landscape for model trains), talking to each other. Let's imagine us there on that bench, having this interview together. I'd like to start off by asking you about the title, **Routine Pleasures**. In 2014, you titled your second solo show at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York

**Mimetic Pleasures**. Are mimetic and routine interchangeable for you? And what are your routine pleasures?

**Melissa Gordon** I'm happy to be on the virtual bench with you, Roos! What would be seen if the camera zoomed out from where we are sitting? It's a great camera trick to imagine ourselves in different exhibitions and studios. The film **Routine Pleasures** has been an influence for some years now, so I wanted to pay homage to it. In the film Gorin acts as a voyeur of two kinds of workers that he edits into one space: model train enthusiasts, and the painter Manny Farber in his studio (painting his studio tables!). In **Routine Pleasures**, labor is both maintenance and play: pleasure and work are collapsed, and this is what I wanted the title of the exhibition at the Vleeshal to reference.

Mimetic and routine are very different for me. Mimicking something speaks more about the gesture of repeating and the subversive and unsettling aspect of that. The mime upsets order by mutely reproducing gestures. Mimesis is something I've been interested in working with for a while. In my silkscreen works, I mimetically reproduce catalogue images of modernist paintings, showing aging or painterly gestures that are

supposedly "original" in pairs and sequences that debunk their originality. In my paintings I mimetically reproduce my own unconscious marks as a painter, as a consciously tongue-in-cheek action.

**RG** The model train fans in Gorin's film all step into the miniature landscape to play. It's a stage the men built up themselves. They take care of it, repair it, clean it, and work on it, for them to have this stage to play. Do you feel like you're stepping onto a stage when you are in the studio or are we allowed in back stage?

**MG** I don't know if the studio is a stage – it feels too private for that. Lately I've been making work whereby I do the gesture of "cleaning" (mopping, sponging, sweeping) a surface that I then expose to silkscreen and print. I'm trying to have all my work focus on, or make an image of, the value of gestures – made by a body with a certain value: Who reproduces value? These works are titled **The Gesture is a Joke** and were hung in an eponymous show on unfinished metal stud walls, which were a mimic of an overlap of my home and studio architecture sitting within a monumental "white cube" space.

I think in my practice the work itself is the back stage – not of the studio but of... a painting? I think a constant move between "front" and "back" (like moving between the two sides of the fake walls in **Routine Pleasures** at the Vleeshal) is interesting in both work and installations. It further disrupts the value of what you are looking at, which is a painting questioning its own value as a mimetic gesture of a routine action.

**RG** In the show at Vleeshal, you're showing a selection of your ongoing series **Material Evidence**, in which the by-products of your painting process play the main role. These traces that you accidentally left on the walls and floors of your studio while working



on other paintings are turned into paintings of their own. Has your working method been influenced by this knowledge that your accidental traces are turned into new paintings? For example, has the gesture of cleaning your brush changed over these past five years, into a more conscious than unconscious act?

MG The studio is a site of production, and all the marks that accumulate on the tables, floors and walls and plastic containers where I mix paint are uncontrolled actions in the process of painting and printing. It's all completely unconscious and accidental. So I had a piece of fake leather on a big table earlier this year to print all the *Blow Ups*, and then I started mixing paint on the table, just out of sheer lack of time! And those marks then were photographed and became paintings that are shown at the Vleeshal. Then I flipped the fabric over, and now other marks are accumulating.

Going back to your question about the stage: I think the stage in my work is set by the role of photography. All my work begins with a photograph, and ends up as a painting in a photographic series. So somehow the camera acts like a way of creating a front and back stage. The paintings are "models" within this staging, like the model worlds in Gorin's *Routine Pleasures*. But they are made by a body, who? I can't escape being the author, but I can create a kind of smoke and mirror or a stage that amplifies the question of authorship itself.

RG At MoMA today I saw a great work by Marcel Broodthaers, entitled *P*, from 1974. Eight items of varying sizes (all round, except for one square) are placed in a table-like vitrine, some of them with the letter "P" on them, others with dashes of color. On the label it reads: "painted plaster, painted wood, stencil, and walnuts." I love the fact

that these walnuts are there. The description on the label goes on to say: "The 'P' of this title might point to painting (peinture, in Broodthaers's native French) or to palettes, the conventional handheld artist's tool for mixing paint, which these discs resemble. Broodthaers included the stencil used to print the letter as a part of the work itself." This work made me think of the paintings in your **Material Evidence** series; the stencil Broodthaers used to print the letter "P" as the material evidence of his making process. I like to think about the questions Broodthaers's work raises in relation to your paintings in the **Material Evidence** series, especially the ones that look like palettes (the ones you refer to as "Trays"). There is a staging of the studio inside of this vitrine, and the question of which gesture can be(come) a painting. I'd be curious to hear how, or if, you relate to this work.

MG P for painting – it sounds like a crime novel! There is so much about clues and hidden meanings in Broodthaers's work; his context feels more like a crime scene than a museum. Your question makes me think about why I have always dealt with an investigation in painting. In the **Material Evidence** series there is a forensic encounter with the studio, and, like you point out, the painting of my palettes (I use old plastic containers) are very much about what "makes" a painting.

I think there's an ever-present missing body in my work, like in a crime scene. I've been writing and lecturing about the character of the drop-out for a few years now, and I'm realizing that the drop-out is a way to think about the limits of the field in which one operates. So I'm often speaking about female artists that have dropped out of the art world, and I'm trying to reframe this gesture as something that is positive and critical; that they are fulfilling the natural trajectory of their work (Lee Lozano,



Charlotte Posenenske, Betty Parsons, Cady Noland). Their absence is a criticism of the way the art world functions. I don't know if my work does that, but I like the idea that the gesture of backing away from the "authorship" of abstract paintings does a kind of critique on both contemporary and historic abstraction.

But what do the walnuts mean?

RG I think there is an interesting tension between presence and absence in your work. I have the feeling that you, by bringing your working process to the fore, also point the viewer toward a critical attitude, toward thinking about how they are making the work by interpreting it. The Vleeshal show with its unfinished walls feels like the opposite of the polished wall Jim Carrey bumps into at the end of *The Truman Show* (1998). You are not constructing a false reality, in a *trompe-l'œil* kind of way. You are showing the construction(s), the process of making. How do you see the role of the viewer? Is s/he a similar critical (productive) body as the writer?

MG This is a very difficult question! I was just speaking about *The Truman Show* as a way of describing how I think of an exhibition as a theatre-in-the-round, but that I'm not interested in the theatricality, but rather, yes, a way of laying bare the making of work, exhibitions, the industry and institutions of art. I came to this question of viewing in the "round" through thinking about the transformation of the exhibition space from salon to gallery, and that this transformation took place through the private spaces of women, modernist women: Gertrude Stein of course, and Betty Parsons, and Peggy Guggenheim. So there's this sense that modernism moves art from the institution to the (female) interior. But the interior is a site of experimentation in early modernism, and I want to embody this in my exhibitions.

I was thinking last night about the avant-garde: I've been interested in this David Joselit text on "aggregators,"<sup>1</sup> where he talks about the exit from "the contemporary," which is an "international style" of endlessly repeated gestures of conceptualism. What does it mean to be "avant" – up against something? Can an artist be "up against" the construction of the world in which they operate?

Is the viewer productive in my exhibitions? The viewer definitely assembles things, discovers things, and reveals things by walking around the exhibition. I'm very conscious of how, when walking around an exhibition, walls disappear, works come into contact with each other, get overlaid by architecture, and are revealed on the backs of walls.

RG I like the way you bring in movement and time in your work. There is a series of three new paintings in the Vleeshal show where on the left one you see a first situation with not that many marks, in the second one already some more gestures, and in the third many more marks. I like how you're spreading out the different stages of a painting over three canvases (which normally happen one after the other on the same canvas). It has something demystifying. Is this demystifying process, this transparency of the artistic process, something you're after?

MG Yes, absolutely, I'm interested in both (de)mystification and transparency. In all of my work, including *Blow Up Modernists*, *Material Evidence*, and now the new series of *Joke Gestures*, I'm thinking about art history and codification. Not only "who gets to be abstract," like Eva Kenny says, but who/what gets reproduced? So in one recent diptych, I juxtaposed a blown-up

<sup>1</sup> David Joselit, "On Aggregators," *October* 146 (Fall 2013): pp.3–18.

## Routine Pleasures

Melissa Gordon im Gespräch mit Roos Gortzak

**Roos Gortzak** Deine Ausstellung in der Vleeshal trägt den Titel **Routine Pleasures**, nach dem gleichnamigen Film von Jean-Pierre Gorin (1986). Zu Beginn des Films sitzen zwei Männer auf einer Bank, die sich später als Teil einer Miniaturszene in einer Modelleisenbahn-Landschaft entpuppt, und unterhalten sich. Stellen wir uns vor, wir könnten für dieses Interview auf jener Bank sitzen. Als erstes würde ich gerne mehr über den Titel **Routine Pleasures** erfahren. 2014 nanntest du deine erste Einzelausstellung in der Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York **Mimetic Pleasures**. Sind die Begriffe »mimetic« und »routine« in deinen Augen austauschbar? Und was ist für dich lustvoll an der Routine?

**Melissa Gordon** Es freut mich, dass wir gemeinsam hier auf der Bank sitzen, Roos! Was man wohl sähe, wenn die Kamera von unserem Sitzplatz herauszoomte? Ein schöner Kunstgriff, dieser Kameratrick: So können wir uns vorstellen, in verschiedenen Ausstellungen und Ateliers zu sein. Der Film **Routine Pleasures** begleitet mich jetzt schon seit einigen Jahren, deshalb wollte ich ihm eine Hommage widmen. In dem Film beobachtet Gorin mit voyeuristischem Interesse zwei verschiedene Arten von Arbeitern, die er durch die Montage in einem Raum zusammenbringt: Modelleisenbahn-Fans und den Maler Manny Farber in seinem Atelier (wo er seine Ateliertische bemalt!). In **Routine Pleasures** bedeutet Mühe gleichzeitig Notwendigkeit und Spiel: Vergnügen und Arbeit bilden eine Einheit, und darauf bezieht sich der Titel meiner Ausstellung in der Vleeshal.

»Mimetic« und »routine« sind für mich grundverschieden. Etwas nachzuahmen spricht mehr von Wiederholung und dem

subversiven, verstörenden Aspekt, den diese haben kann: Der Mime stört die Ordnung, indem er stumm die Gesten anderer Menschen wiederholt. Ich beschäftige mich in meiner Arbeit jetzt schon länger mit Mimesis. In meinen Siebdruck-Arbeiten bilde ich mimetisch Katalogbilder von modernen Gemälden nach und stelle dabei ihren Alterungsprozess oder den angeblich so »originellen« malerischen Gestus heraus. Dabei benutze ich die Gegenüberstellung in Paaren und Reihungen, um den Originalitätsmythos zu entzaubern. In meinen Gemälden reproduziere ich mimetisch meine eigenen beiläufigen malerischen Gesten, eine bewusst ironische Handlung.

**RG** Die Modelleisenbahn-Fans in Gorins Film begeben sich alle zum Spielen in die Miniatur-Landschaft, eine Bühne, die die Männer sich selbst gebaut haben. Sie kümmern sich um die Instandhaltung, reparieren, putzen und entwickeln sie weiter, um sich die Bühne zu erhalten, auf der sie spielen. Kommt es dir so vor, als würdest du eine Bühne betreten, wenn du ins Atelier gehst, oder lädst du uns eher hinter die Bühne ein?

**MG** Ich weiß nicht, ob das Atelier für mich eine Bühne ist – dafür fühlt es sich zu privat an. In letzter Zeit mache ich Arbeiten, in denen ich die Bewegungen des »Putzens« (Wischen, Abtupfen mit einem Schwamm, Kehren) auf einer Oberfläche vollziehe, die ich dann weiter mit Siebdruck bearbeite. Ich versuche in meiner Arbeit immer, mich auf den Wert von Gesten zu konzentrieren – die von einem Körper mit einem bestimmten Wert vollzogen werden – oder diesen abzubilden. Die Frage ist: Wer reproduziert Wert? Diese Arbeiten tragen den Titel **The Gesture is a Joke** und wurden in einer gleichnamigen Ausstellung an unfertig aussehende Metallständerwände gehängt, die die Schnittstelle zwischen der Architektur meines Zuhause und meines Ateliers mit einem

image of a Janet Sobel painting, the only known reproduction in print, with a Jackson Pollock painting from a book of Pollocks, amongst a sea of books about Pollock. The Sobel painting is made one year before Pollock's first "drip" painting, and it uses the exact same technique used by Pollock that is his supposed "original concept." It is such a stark example of how art history mystifies and obfuscates information to create value. So the "Blow Up" exposes this, but it also shows painting gestures in extreme detail, and they are further confused by the halftone of the print surface of the catalogues.

All of the **Material Evidence** works are shown together in pairs or more and they display camera techniques like you describe – zooms, pans, crops, and stop-motion. So the process of painting is addressed in the individual works and the process of viewing is addressed in the relationships between the paintings.

**RG** When emailing with you about possible titles for this show, one title you were thinking of was "Female Genius" – referring to Lynne Tillman's novel **American Genius, A Comedy** (2006). What is appealing to you in **American Genius**?

**MG** Lynne Tillman is there at every corner in our conversation! After discussing the title "Female Genius" we decided on "**Routine Pleasures**," and then I discovered the coincidence of her interview with Jean-Pierre Gorin! "Female Genius" comes from a hilarious quiz Eva Kenny wrote – "Are you a female genius?"<sup>2</sup> – and it is central to an ongoing project of mine, **WE (Not I)**, that took place in London at South London Gallery and Flat Time House and then in New York at Artists Space in 2015. Both iterations were week-long meetings and exchanges between female artists with public events in the evenings. Kenny and Tillman have both been involved: Kenny took part in an event

at SLG on value systems with Christine Battersby, who wrote **Gender and Genius** (1989), and Tillman did an evening reading with Angie Keefer at Artists Space called **Finding Words**. The project, which will culminate in a series of publications, bridges the public and private, and addresses questions around authorship such as trust, confidence, genius, legacy, voice.

**RG** In an interview in **BOMB Magazine** with artist Moyra Davey, an artist who nicely bridges the private and the public, the interviewer Elisabeth Lebovici asks: "Are you on the side of the made, or are you on the side of the making?" As a last question of this interview, I'd like to ask you the same.

**MG** I'm definitely on the side of the making! I'm playing defense for the making team! Painting is like an urge, I am an addict of making – that's why, for me, it requires an editing process.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Kenny, "Are you a female genius?", not yet published.